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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 HANOI 000812

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: THE ROLE OF THINK TANKS IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS

REF: A. 02 Hanoi 2871 B. Hanoi 0362

1. (U) SUMMARY: The GVN supports an extensive network of research institutes ("think tanks") under the National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities (NCSSH). Among its 25 think tanks, five focus on Vietnam's external relations. While their influence appears modest, the think tanks provide advice and information to GVN ministries (and relatively candid opinions to emboffs, unusual in this system) as part of the policy planning process. Most research projects are self-generated, but the think tanks also respond to specific ministry requests; they likely have more influence in the latter category. Expansion of the foreign affairs-related think tanks in the foreseeable future is unlikely due to budget constraints and a lack of trained personnel. END SUMMARY.

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A look at the NCSSH  
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2. (U) The NCSSH in its present incarnation has existed since 1993. A predecessor -- "the Department of Literature, History and Geography" -- began in 1953 and operated through the war years but on a limited basis. According to Dr. Nguyen Giang Hai, NCSSH's Acting Director for International Cooperation, the framework organization now includes 25 entities and employs about 1,350 permanent staff, mostly researchers, in its:

- Center for China Studies;
- Center for Japan Studies/Koreas Studies (Note: The Koreas Center is administratively part of the Center for Japan Studies. End Note);
- Center for European Studies;
- Center for North America Studies;
- Institute of Southeast Asia Studies;
- Institute of Philosophy;
- Institute of Sociology;
- Institute of Economics;
- Institute of World Economy;
- Institute of State and Law;
- Institute of History;
- Institute of Human Studies;
- Institute of Archaeology;
- Institute of Ethnology;
- Institute of Literature;
- Institute of Linguistics;
- Institute of Folklore Studies;
- Institute of Han Nom Studies (i.e., pre-romanized Vietnamese script and literature);
- Institute of Psychology;
- Institute of Religious Studies;
- Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City;
- Center for Human Geography;
- Center for Family and Women Studies;
- Museum of Ethnology (which just co-organized the major Vietnamese exhibition with the American Museum of Natural History in New York City).

3. (U) Most of the research at the five foreign affairs think tanks is self-generated, Dr. Hai noted, while adding that "about 15-20 percent" stems from direct requests from various ministries (primarily Ministry of Foreign Affairs). He guessed that this ratio likely varies among the think tanks, however. Dr. Hai added that most think tanks focus their efforts in three areas: (1) basic research to assist the GVN in policy planning; (2) training students for MA and PhD programs; and, (3) research on various aspects of social sciences and humanities.

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CENTER FOR CHINA STUDIES  
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4. (U) Dr. Nguyen Tien Sam, Director of the China Studies Center, noted that his Center researches subjects relevant broadly to the PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao, but the bulk of its work focuses on the PRC. Researchers specialize both in Chinese history as well as modern day conditions and bilateral relations, including Vietnam/PRC and PRC/US. Dr. Sam said that, in recent years, the Center had "given considerable attention" to the PRC's experience in economic reform and how that experience may apply to Vietnam's own reform efforts. Other research focuses on predicting policy

trends in the PRC and how such trends might impact Vietnam. Long and short-term research projects have examined Chinese culture and society.

15. (U) The Center has also hosted seminars with other domestic and foreign research institutions (including a lively half-day session on US-China relations featuring Ambassador Burghardt in December 2002). Dr. Sam highlighted a recent seminar on the PRC's 16th Party Congress, which examined its particular relevance to Vietnam (ref a). Dr. Sam admitted that the China Studies Center was not immune from outside pressures, lamenting in particular that a planned seminar on Vietnam - Taiwan relations, scheduled for August 2002 in Hanoi, had been postponed due to "strong objections" from the PRC Embassy in Hanoi (ref b). The seminar is now planned for April; however, the venue has been switched to Taipei.

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CENTER FOR NORTH AMERICA STUDIES  
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16. (U) Nguyen Thien Son, Director of the North America Center, said that his Center focuses on Vietnam's political, economic, cultural, social, and historical relations with the United States, Canada, and Mexico. The North America Center views itself as a "bridge" between scholars and businesspeople in North America and Vietnam, Son noted. To this end, the Center also produces articles and publications in English on various North American political and economic issues, although the bulk of its work remains in Vietnamese. Dr. Son added that a major ongoing project is to examine Vietnam - US relations under the present Administration.

17. (U) Dr. Son estimated that "about 15 percent" of his Center's work results from specific requests from ministries, especially MFA. There is normally "some urgency" to these latter requests, he claimed. Two recent requests included analyses on US society after the September 11 attacks and on US - North Korea relations. Other GVN "clients" include the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and the Ministry of Defense (MOD). At the request of MFA, MOD, and MPS, the Center is currently analyzing "US strategic goals in Southeast Asia," Son claimed, highlighting the interest of those two ministries in developing a long-term strategy to counterbalance US policy. MOD has now additionally tasked the Center to examine "The Iraq War and Its Consequences," according to Son.

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INSTITUTE FOR SOUTHEAST ASIA STUDIES  
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18. (U) Dr. Tran Khanh, Head of the Institute's Political Research and International Relations Department, described its foci as economic, political, historical, and cultural issues among Southeast Asian countries (especially bilaterally with Vietnam) as well as their relationships with world powers, notably the U.S. Dr. Khanh said that the Institute also examines regional issues such as ASEAN's role and development. According to Dr. Khanh, the Institute's main GVN clients are MFA, MOD, the Ministry of Trade, and the Ministry of Planning and Investment. At the request of the MFA, the Center is now working on a project to analyze Vietnam's future links with ASEAN, projecting ahead to 2010.

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CENTER FOR JAPAN/KOREAS STUDIES  
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19. (U) Ngo Xuan Binh, Deputy Director of the Center for Japan Studies (and concurrently Director of the Center for Korea Studies), said that his Center initially focused mainly on Japanese politics, economy, history, society, culture, and language. Concerning Vietnam - Japan relations, the Center has analyzed the bilateral relationship since the implementation of Vietnam's "doi moi" (renovation) policy in 1986, as well as changes in Japan's foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. Binh described his Center's main purpose as assisting GVN policy makers.

110. (U) In addition to research projects, Binh cited other Center activities, including a seminar on Vietnam - Japan relations planned for September 2003 to mark the 30th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic relations. Binh added that the Center also hosted a seminar in March comparing education in Vietnam and Japan.

111. (U) Not until 1998 did the NCSSH direct the Japan Center to undertake research on the Koreas, Binh claimed, and established a small Center for Korea Studies under the Japan Center. Since then, the Korea Center has primarily looked at South Korea, because there is little information available about North Korea and because the GVN views the relationship with South Korea as "having more potential," Binh added.

12. (U) Binh noted that a March 2001 Center workshop on administrative reforms in South Korea had attracted "considerable interest from several GVN ministries." More recently, a December 2002 seminar on educational reforms in South Korea was also "well attended," he added. However, Binh lamented that, while his Center regularly distributes its journal and other publications to different government agencies, "few officials read them."

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CENTER FOR EUROPEAN STUDIES  
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13. (U) Bui Nhat Quang, Deputy Chief of the Vietnam - European Union (EU) Research Department of the Center for European Studies, detailed research efforts on Vietnam's relations with northern, western, and eastern Europe, the EU, and Russia. Major foci include EU development trends and their significance for Vietnam, how to broaden Vietnam's political and economic relationship with Europe, and assisting GVN ministries "better to understand Europe." Quang noted that the Center is working on a three-year project, funded by the EU, to establish a documentation center that will provide more information about Europe as well as improve the Center's research capabilities. The project also supports EU-related conferences, including a February 2003 conference on ASEAN - EU relations.

14. (U) Quang added that the Center's primary audience is the MFA, but the Center also has "close relationships" with local universities, especially Vietnam National University's Faculty of International Studies. Quang volunteered only that his Center "occasionally" implements projects in response to on specific GVN requests/taskings.

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LIMITED IMPACT  
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15. (U) According to the NCSSH's Dr. Hai, the foreign policy think tanks, while tasked "to advise" the GVN, are not a major component of the decision-making process but "may have some limited influence." Dr. Hai pointed out that "one must differentiate between general research and work performed at a ministry's request." If a request is "urgent," it is likely to be given more attention and "have more impact," he claimed. Dr. Hai added that think tank officials also exert a "certain amount of influence" as advisors to GVN delegations on overseas missions.

16. (U) According to Nguyen Thanh Huy, a senior expert from the MFA's ASEAN Department, think tank materials serve as "useful references, but have a limited audience." However, he agreed that when a think tank performs an analysis based on a specific request, "it has more influence." Separately, Nguyen Thi Thanh Thuy, Deputy Dean at Vietnam National University's Faculty of International Studies, said that her staff and students "do not generally pay much attention" to think tank materials, while claiming that her faculty had a "good relationship" with the foreign affairs think tanks. Thuy added that the amount of "new research" the think tanks performed was "limited." She observed that "much of what they publish" was material translated from foreign sources. Dang Hoang Giang, senior expert at the MFA's Laws and Treaties Department, said separately that he and his colleagues pay "little attention" to think tank material. He could not recall any specific research requests made by his department recently to any of the foreign affairs think tanks.

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ADDITIONAL THINK TANKS UNLIKELY  
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17. (U) According to Tran Thi Lan Anh, Deputy Director of NCSSH's International Cooperation Department, NCSSH has requested that the Prime Minister's office authorize additional research institutes to specialize in the Middle East and Africa. However, Anh admitted that, while the GVN "understands the importance of these areas," separate centers were "unlikely" for the foreseeable future due to budget constraints and a lack of qualified personnel. Research and analysis projects are also carried out by the MFA, especially its Institute for International Relations. Anh commented that most MFA officers are "too busy" with other work to perform significant research, however.

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COMMENT  
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18. (U) The GVN spends a surprising amount of its limited budgetary resources on these research institutes, apparently to no particularly meaningful purpose apart perhaps from employment generation among intellectuals. The think tanks nonetheless seem to have found a somewhat complementary niche, performing tasks that ministries have neither the

time nor resources to undertake, and increasingly reaching out to regional and international counterparts. Of most relevance to the USG, think tankers are among the embassy's more open, accessible, and knowledgeable interlocutors (even to the extent sometimes of offering personal views, unusual in this system), even if their GVN audience is not reading their reports.

BURGHARDT